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Rhetorical Action and Constitutive Politics

Abstract: This article reconstructs the concept of rhetorical action to excavate its original, recurrent, and—for many—discomforting links to constitutive politics. By examining the history of rhetorical action through the ancient period to the mid-17th century, I will argue that that relationship between rhetorical action and constitutive politics is a powerful prism for understanding *actio*. The article's contributions are twofold and compounding. The first is the establishment of a positive account of the relation between *actio* and constitutive rhetoric for the ancient politicians and early modern dramatists, which pushes the usual bookends of *actio*'s history both backward and forward, providing analytical leverage to critically reflect on its standard history. The second contribution is a demonstration that much of the confusion and discomfort surrounding *actio* results from formulating *actio* negatively against its constitutive political threat. In sum, this article contributes to both the theoretical and historical understanding of rhetorical action.

Keywords: Rhetorical action, *actio*, constitutive rhetoric, constitutive politics

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Introduction

This article reconstructs the concept of rhetorical action to excavate its original, recurrent, and—for many—discomforting links to constitutive politics. The study spans the ancient to the early modern periods, ending in the mid-17th century. Before setting out my arguments, allow me to briefly consider a few signposts in the standard history of *actio* to frame my intended contribution. From first to last, philosophers and rhetoricians have struggled with and against *actio*. Plato, rather unpersuasively, conflated *actio* with politics and went to philosophical war against the practice. Aristotle noted that delivery "has the greatest force but has not yet been taken in hand."[1] That is, it was acknowledged as being of the utmost importance, though rhetoricians had not yet been able to theoretically circumscribe exactly what its power was, or how it could be extricated from its vulgar and popular connections. Cicero described *actio* similarly as a "vast and indeed incredible power" with a capacity to make "any impression on the unlearned crowd."[2] Yet, while deprecating the idea, Cicero's also idealized it in the person of the mythical orator-founder. Skipping ahead, by the 17th century (where my historical reconstruction ends) most rhetoricians had stopped considering *actio* altogether, much as contemporary commentators have. There are exceptions, but they only deepen the puzzlement surrounding *actio*. For example, John Bulwer's *Chirologia* (1644) takes the subject "in hand" quite literally, detailing and sketching how orators should use gestures to persuade audiences. The issue here is that if Bulwer did finally fulfil Aristotle's desire for a thoroughgoing technical explication of *actio*, he does so at the cost of scuttling *actio* in its full political sense. These signposts are indicative of a tendency for accounts of *actio* to oscillate between the mythic and the mundane, with grandiose claims of political power (vulgar or idealized) and technical accounts that seem unrelated to that power.

I will reconstruct a history of *actio* that prioritizes its connection to constitutive politics.[3] Most generally, the driving thesis of this article is

[1]Aristotle, *On Rhetoric: A Theory of Civic Discourse*, trans. George A. Kennedy, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 1403b–4a.

[2]Marcus Tullius Cicero, *De Oratore Book III, De Fato, Paradox Stoicorum, De Partitione Oratoria*, ed. G. P. Goold, trans. H. Rackham, vol. IV, The Loeb Classic Library (Cambridge: William Heinemann Ltd, 1977), 3.1.195–7.

[3]I will use the term "constitutive rhetoric" throughout this article. There is limited literature on constitutive rhetoric, which focuses primarily on 20th century theorists. For a general overview, see Thomas O. Sloane, "Constitutive Rhetoric," in *Encyclopedia*

that constitutive politics are the black hole of rhetoric that philosophers and rhetoricians have struggled against in myriad ways. By "constitutive politics," I mean the politics related to the construction of a polity's political identity, often in moments of political emergency, and often in ways that allow the people to act in concert to address these crises. I will show that *actio*'s relationship with constitutive politics is a powerful prism for understanding *actio*, yielding insights into both its theory and history. The article's contributions are twofold and compounding. The first is a positive account of the connection between *actio* and constitutive rhetoric in the ancient and early modern periods. These accounts are usually left out of the standard history of *actio*, and there is descriptive and analytical value to their expression.[4] The two instances I examine are the initial account by the eminent founders and politicians of ancient Greece, and the striking return to the ideas of constitutive rhetorical action by the English dramatists. This first contribution pushes the bookends of the history of action both forward and backward. It yields important analytical leverage for critically reflecting on the standard history of *actio* and, thus, frames the other contribution.

The second contribution presents the confusion and discomfort sketched above (and in detail below) as an output of the tendency of philosophers and rhetoricians to formulate *actio* negatively *against* the ever-present threat constitutive rhetorical action poses to constituted regimes. We see this crudely and unpersuasively in Plato's founding philosophical assault on constitutive rhetorical action, and more obliquely—but effectively—in Aristotle criticism of delivery. Henceforth, rhetoricians have understood *actio* in various negative, idealized, or routinized ways, but rarely in terms of its original constitutive manifestation. Nevertheless, the positive manifestation is always discomforting as a political threat against constituted regimes—and, as will be shown, one common tact is to sing high praises to the overwhelming political power of *actio* while simultaneously avoiding those politics. Thus, the aforementioned extremes to which *actio* has been pulled expresses and replicates a longstanding assault on the idea of rhetorical action in its constitutive mode—often passively, but to the same end.

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of Rhetoric (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); see also Maurice Charland, "Constitutive Rhetoric: The Case of the Peuple Québécois," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 73, no. 2 (1987): 133–50.

[4]Examples of surveys of rhetoric that leave out substantive considerations of *actio* include Brian Vickers, *In Defence of Rhetoric* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989); Quentin Skinner, *Reason and Rhetoric in the Philosophy of Hobbes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

Both moves—asserting the link between *actio* and constitutive politics, and moving the bookends back and forth—unfold through a survey of *actio*'s history. The survey, and the article's structure, is organized as follows:

1) The pre-philosophical beginning of *actio* in spectacular constitutive politics;
2) The philosophical counterattack, including the assault upon and reconfiguration of *actio* in Plato and Aristotle;
3) The transformation and mystification of *actio* in Cicero and Quintilian;
4) The whittling of *actio* down to pronunciation and gestures;
5) The re-discovery of and return to *actio* by sixteenth and seventeenth century dramatists.

Political foundations

The history of rhetoric is replete with celebrations of—and assaults on—a series of ancient political figures, both Greek and Roman. These figures are typically great political actors who deploy what subsequent commentators have broadly stylized as *actio*. Four figures stand out: Solon, Pericles, Themistocles, and Demosthenes. While these exemplary figures act as touchstones for the whole rhetorical tradition, it is crucial to explicate their significance on their own terms, and not those of the rhetorical tradition that followed.

Consider first Solon. Plutarch tells of a corrupted Athenian polis that, tired of fighting the Megarians for control of Salamis, passed a law banning all public utterances promoting a renewal of hostilities. This peace, however, was bought at the price of pride and integrity. Although many wanted to go to war again, none would disobey the law. Solon, Plutarch tells us, "could not endure the disgrace," "composed some elegiac verses, and after rehearsing them so that he could say them by rote, he sallied out in the market-place."[5] Plutarch does not write of Solon's use of gestures in particular, but conveys a more general account of the popular and theatrical spectacle that was essential to the persuasive delivery of the speech. Feigning madness and addressing a large crowd "with a cap upon his head," he stood on

[5]Plutarch, *Lives: Theseus and Romulus, Lycurgus and Numa, Solon and Publicola*, trans. Bernadotte Perrin, vol. I, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), Solon.8.

the "herald's stone and recited the poem."[6] Having won the praise of his friends and fellow citizens for his poem, Solon proceeded to successfully overturn the law against aggression, ultimately going on to command the war against Salamis. "At this point," Plutarch writes, "the wisest of the Athenians cast their eyes upon Solon. They saw that he was the one man least implicated in the errors of the time."[7] Solon was viewed as prudent, transcending partisan and economic divisions, and above all else, committed to the well-being of the polity. Consequently, "their chief men persistently recommended a tyranny to Solon, and tried to persuade him to seize the city all the more confidently now that he had it completely in his power."[8] Not only did Solon facilitate the constitution of a new political identity, his powers of persuasion were so thoroughgoing that the people took themselves to be authors of that new identity.

Solon's deployment of persuasion and his political deeds were synergistic undertakings. James Fredal writes that in Solon, as with Theseus,

> we see a similar pattern of elements: the function of the herald gathering a people together into a common space to constitute a united force under arms, a political intervention at a sacred festival, the use of disguise and impersonation . . . for political ends, [and] *the centrality of a performative politics that orchestrates symbolic resources to direct united action*.[9]

Fredal is correct. The weight of the symbolic reconstruction of Athenian identity was born by the charisma and eminence manifest in Solon's spectacular and ultimately persuasive actions. Solon may have learned his poem by rote, but his persuasiveness was not established upon a mastery of rhetorical *theory*. Solon's deeds were facilitated by what is variously ascribed to as a "natural gift" of persuasion, without which he would have been unsuccessful. Solon is never portrayed as an especially gifted rhetorician; he is instead shown as having a special gift of character, foresight, and political acumen. Solon's rhetorical deeds were grounded in concrete political acts of great and evident import conjoined to charismatic leadership and great political deeds.

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[6]Plutarch, I:Solon.8. See also Demosthenes, *Demosthenes, Speeches 18 And 19*, ed. Harvey Yunis (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005), 188–89.

[7]Plutarch, *Lives*, 1967, I:Solon.14.1.

[8]Plutarch, I:Solon.14.3.

[9]James Fredal, *Rhetorical Action In Ancient Athens: Persuasive Artistry from Solon to Demosthenes* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2006), 41 [emphasis added]. See also, Harvey Yunis, *Taming Democracy: Models of Political Rhetoric in Classical Athens* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 223–24.

Solon's rhetoric is exemplary of what would much later be stylized as *actio*; it is this context that gives his rhetorical deeds their importance. The subsequent stylization of the rhetorical arts were, as we have seen, already prefigured by anxieties surrounding the power of constitutive rhetoric in destabilizing the constituted order. Hence, these accounts—though unencumbered by the judgments and theorizations of the philosophers—allow us to begin grasping what the philosophers were writing against. They focus our attention on the special powers of great rhetorical-political deeds, when existential threats to the polity were otherwise ignored due to political torpidity, social strife, and moral equivocation. Likewise, it draws our attention to the role of rhetoric in the construction of new regimes and new identities. Solon is recorded as having united a divided and corrupt Athenian society while implementing reforms that, although not immediately effective, would eventually secure the constitutional foundation upon which Athens would flourish in the following centuries. The story is also interesting because it foretells a modality of social covenanting. Here, it suffices to flag Plutarch's description of the moment: "When Solon had sung it [his poem], his friends began to praise him, and Peisistratus in particular urged and incited the citizens to obey his words. They therefore repealed the law and renewed the war, putting Solon in command of it."[10] It is a constitutive moment wherein a corrupt and lethargic established order is overturned and a new one established—all on the backs of a persuasively delivered poem. It is a "constitutive" moment, because the poem does not simply persuade the audience. It reconfigures their identities and establishes their cohesion as a people. The case for this conjunction becomes stronger as the historical evidence becomes more robust.

Themistocles is another example of a natural talent who, from his youth, had both the gifts and the inclination to use rhetorical persuasion in the service of great deeds. As with the other orator-founders/leaders discussed here, the measure of Themistocles's rhetorical exhortation was his contribution to the well-being of the polis. The most rousing encomium of Themistocles is found in Thucydides:

> Themistocles was indeed a man who displayed beyond doubt, and more than any other, natural genius to a quite exceptional and awesome degree. Through the pure application of his own intelligence, and without the aid of any briefing or debriefing, he was a consummate judge of the needs of the moment at very short notice, and supreme in conjecturing the future, more accurate than any in his forecast of events as they

[10]Plutarch, *Lives*, 1967, I:Solon.8.

> would actually happen. He had the gift of explaining clearly all that he himself undertook, and was not lacking in competent judgement on matters outside his experience: and he foresaw better than any the possible advantage and disadvantage in a yet uncertain future. In summary, the intuitive power of his mind and the speed of his preliminary thought gave Themistocles an unrivalled ability to improvise what was needed at any time.[11]

Cicero provides a similar rendition to this story. He writes that Themistocles, "whom we know to have been pre-eminent in eloquence as well as in political shrewdness," was comparable to Pericles, who was "distinguished in every form of excellence, and especially illustrious in this art"[12]—namely, the act of establishing a new (or renewed) political order by means of exemplary rhetorical action. Notably, Plutarch also remarks that later in his life, Themistocles had won an award as a "theatrical manager."[13] The relationship between theater and *actio* would become an enduring point of derision by subsequent philosophers and rhetoricians.

Pericles is cast in a similar light. Thucydides writes that Pericles epitomized prudential thinking, writing that his "power was in his distinguished reputation and his intellect, and he was patently incorruptible."[14] Most strikingly, Pericles is said to have "controlled the mass of the people with a free hand, leading them rather than letting them lead him."[15] Thucydides writes of Periclean Athens that "what was happening was democracy in name, but in fact the dominion of the leading man."[16] Pericles transcended regular politics, and the steady decay of Athens in his wake was a direct result of subsequent attic orators who were "more on a level with one another, and because each was striving for first position they were inclined to indulge popular whim even in matters of state policy."[17] Plutarch writes that Pericles deployed a novel form of rhetoric that provided "himself with a style of discourse which was adapted, like a musical instrument, to his mode of life and the grandeur of his sentiments." This style was noted for "subtly mingling"

[11]Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, trans. Martin Hammond (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), I.138.

[12]Marcus Tullius Cicero, *Brutus, Orator*, ed. E. H. Warmington, trans. G. L. Hendrickson and H. M. Hubbell, vol. V, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), Brutus.28.

[13]Plutarch, *Lives: Themistocles and Camillus. Aristides and Cato Major, Cimon and Lucullus*, trans. Bernadotte Perrin, vol. II, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968), Themistocles.5.

[14]Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, II.65.

[15]Thucydides, II.65.

[16]Thucydides, II.65.

[17]Thucydides, II.65.

the rhetorical arts and the natural sciences. Like Themistocles, his was also a highly theatrical style described as "thundering" and "lightening [sic]" when he scolded his audience, as if he was "wielding a dread thunderbolt in his tongue." Pericles excelled in conjoining rhetorical practice and philosophy. "It was from natural science," Plutarch continues (quoting Plato), that Pericles "acquired his loftiness of thought and perfectness of execution, in addition to his natural gifts."[18]

Plutarch writes that Pericles alone could bring unity to the disparate peoples of the empire:

> [H]e alone was so endowed by nature that he could manage each one of these cases suitably, and more than anything else he used the people's hopes and fears, like rudders, so to speak, giving timely check to their arrogance, and allaying and comforting their despair. Thus he proved that rhetoric, or the art of speaking, is, to use Plato's words, 'an enchantment of the soul,' and that her chiefest business is a careful study of the affections and passions, which are, so to speak, strings and steps of the soul, requiring a very judicious fingering and striking. *The reason for his success was not his power as a speaker merely, but . . . the reputation of his life and the confidence reposed in him as one who was manifestly proven to be utterly disinterested and superior to bribes. He made the city, great as it was when he took it, the greatest and richest of all cities.*[19]

Aristotle tells a similar story in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, where he styles Pericles as a paragon of practical wisdom.[20] The conjunction of natural rhetorical gifts, a philosophical inclination, and a magnanimous concern with the common good are all for naught unless realized in practice. Indeed, none of these attributes exists apart from the political act itself. Again, the symbolic realm is important, but the political realm is decisive. As with Solon, the technique is inseparable from the deed, and the flourishing of the *polis* is the measure of the political actor.

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[18]Plutarch, *Lives: Pericles and Fabius Maximus, Nicias and Crassus*, trans. Bernadotte Perrin, vol. III, Loeb Classical Library (London: William Heinemann Ltd, 1932), Pericles.8. Plutarch is paraphrasing Aristophanes here, without noting the critical nature of Aristophanes' portrayal of Pericles. Cf. "The Acharnians," in *Aristophanes*, trans. Benjamin Bickley Rogers, vol. 1, Loeb Classical Library (London: William Heinemann Ltd, 1930), 523–48.

[19]Plutarch, *Lives*, 1932, III:Pericles.15 [emphasis added].

[20]Aristotle writes:

> It remains therefore that it is a true and practical state involving reason, concerned with what is good and bad for a human being. For while production has an end distinct from itself, this could not be so with action, since the end here is acting well itself. This is why we think Pericles and people like him are practically wise, because they can see what is good for themselves and what is good for people in general. *Nicomachean Ethics*, ed. Roger Crisp (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 1140b.

Demosthenes is perhaps the most cited example of a great orator in the humanist tradition. Unlike Themistocles, Demosthenes was not a natural talent. Instead, he had to learn his art. Plutarch begins by noting the difficulty in tracing Demosthenes's rhetorical education, as different sources make contradictory claims concerning the various influences of Plato, Isocrates, Isaeus, and Alcidamas.[21] However, Plutarch writes that more important than these influences on Demosthenes's style was the theatrical influence of "Satyrus the actor."[22] Demosthenes famously advised that rhetors concern themselves with three things above all: "delivery, delivery, and delivery," a dictum that is endlessly quoted by subsequent rhetoricians (to whom I will turn shortly). What goes largely without note by these same rhetoricians is that Demosthenes's oratorical persuasiveness was not simply a question of technique. It was also fundamentally intertwined with his politics. Thus, in *On The Crown*, Demosthenes recounts his own deeds in response to the threat posed by Philip of Macedonia. In the fall of 399 BC, Philip had successfully taken Elatea, thereby providing him with a route to invade Athens. Having received the news:

> [T]he Presiding Officers called the Council to the Council-house while you proceeded to the Assembly, and before the Council could deliberate and endorse a proposal, the entire citizen body was seated up there. After this, the Council entered and the Presiding Officers announced the news they had received, and they produced the messenger to give his report. Then the herald asked, "Who wishes to speak?" but no one came forward. The herald asked many times but to no avail. *No one rose, though all the generals were present and all the politicians too, and the country was calling for a speaker to save it. For the voice of the herald lawfully discharging his task is rightly considered the common voice of the country.*[23]

The response was silence, following which "*the one who emerged as the right man on that day was I. I stepped forward and addressed you.*"[24] In a moment of constitutional crisis and amidst an existential threat to the city—and after every other Athenian fell silent—Demosthenes alone spoke, thereby bringing order to a fractious and irrational polity. For Demosthenes, delivery and the wellbeing of the democratic polis were co-constitutive. As Kennedy notes, Demosthenes "knew all tricks and rules of rhetoric, but they were to him only means to a far more

[21]Plutarch, *Lives: Demosthenes and Cicero. Alexander and Caesar*, trans. Bernadotte Perrin, vol. VII, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1919), Demosthenes.5.

[22]Plutarch, VII:Demosthenes.7.

[23]Demosthenes, *Demosthenes, Speeches 18 And 19*, paras. 170–1.

[24]Demosthenes, para. 173.

important end. As his career developed he made that end the preservation of Athenian democracy and institutions as he knew them and recovery of the spirit that had made them."[25] Fundamentally, however, as the italicized passages suggest, this was a constitutive rhetorical deed. While Demosthenes is celebrated by the humanist rhetoricians, they have also interpolated Demosthenes's style in an unduly technical framework that occludes the constitutive political aspects of his rhetorical deeds. For his own part, Demosthenes was not looking forward. He was looking back—with urgency—to a tradition of rhetorical action which had not yet been subordinated to the theoreticians.

Each of these figures is exemplary of *actio* still unbound by the philosopher's distinction between theory and practice, therefore unencumbered by the concomitant derision of the democratic media and theatrical deployment of rhetorical action. The measure of their greatness is always the flourishing of the *polis*, the highest order of which is the successful establishment of a new polity, the unification of a multitude, and/or the (re)foundation of a regime. Each of these figures is shown as reacting against the laws, traditions, and norms which define their political contexts—doing so at great personal risk and to the immediate antagonism of the populace—then having those deeds legitimated by subsequent historical events, affirming their prudence and wisdom. Lastly, in every case, these acts are resistant to theoretical stylization exactly because they emerge in the context of extraordinary political moments, and incorporate those moments into the rhetorical deed itself. As will be seen in the next section, these eminently political practices will come under sustained assault by the philosophers and rhetoricians. However, it is important to avoid methodological prolepsis and, as much as possible, describe them in their own terms.

Philosophical cloisters

At the core of Plato's assault on political life is a comprehensive attack on the rhetorical arts. Plato's critique of rhetoric derives from his critique of the epistemological presumptions of the rhetoricians.[26] For Plato, opinion stands in opposition to the philosophically real,

[25]George Kennedy, *The Art of Persuasion in Greece* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), 236.

[26]On Plato's assault on rhetoric, see Vickers, *In Defence of Rhetoric*, chap. 2.

the corollary being that politics stands in opposition to philosophy. The realm of opinion and politics is the realm of language; the realm of philosophy is the realm of thought and the soul. By its very nature, rhetoric turns agents away from truth and the soul, while relishing in publicity and opinion. Plato's critique of the rhetorical arts is exhaustive, encompassing critiques of Thrasymachean, Isocratean, and Gorgian rhetoric.[27] Plato's harshest criticism, however, focuses on the type of figure delineated above: the revered orator-founders and leaders (Plato has only slightly less antipathy for the dramatists). More than any other aspect of his thought, these attacks exemplify Plato's assault on political life and the idea of rhetorical action where it is most intimately tied to the *vita activa*.

By way of example, consider Socrates's imagined speech to Homer in the tenth book of *Republic*:

> *Socrates*: But about the most important and most beautiful things of which Homer undertakes to speak—warfare, generalship, city government, and people's education—about these it *is* fair to question him, asking him this: "Homer, if you're not third from the truth about virtue, the sort of craftsman of images that we defined an imitator to be, but if you're even second and capable of knowing what ways of life make people better in private or in public, then tell us which cities are better governed because of you, as Sparta is because of Lycurgus, and as many others—big and small—are because of many other men? What city gives you credit for being a good lawgiver who benefited it, as Italy and Sicily do to Charondas, and as we do to Solon? Who gives such credit to you?" Will he be able to name one?
>
> *Glaucon*: I suppose not, for not even the Homeridael make that claim for him.[28]

Though Plato's critique here is explicitly directed at Homer, his praise of the orator-statesman is later revealed as deeply ironic. Where the poets had never proven their capacity to found new cities, in Plato's assessment the orator-founders/statesmen have only ever acted as catalysts of corruption. In *Republic*, Themistocles is

[27]See "Phaedrus," in *Plato: Complete Works*, trans. Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), 506–56; "Gorgias," in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson, trans. Donald J. Zeyl (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), 791–869; "Republic," in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson, trans. G. M. A. Grube and C. D. C. Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), 974–1223. See also Elizabeth Asmis, "Psychagogia in Plato's Phaedrus," *Illinois Classical Studies* 11, no. 1 & 2 (1986): 153–72; Vickers, *In Defence of Rhetoric*, chap. 2.

[28]Plato, "Republic," l. 599b-e.

treated in essentially the same way, as are the Seven Sages (including Solon) in the *Protagoras*.[29] In *Gorgias*, Plato certainly attacks the sophists, but independently takes aim at Themistocles, Cimon, Miltiades, and Pericles with rather unpersuasive vigor. In *Phaedrus*, Pericles is singled out initially as one of the few practitioners of the rhetorical arts who had "natural ability," as well having a "lofty point of view" in reference to questions of "universal applicability."[30] However, as with the founders and poets, this encomium is again eventually revealed as ironic, and the orator-founders are cast as debased sophists who wrought destruction and political disorder. Pericles in particular is cast as a failure because of the fleetingness of his accomplishments, which were scuttled upon his death.[31]

Plato does make an exception for *psychagogia* (or "directing the soul by means of speech"[32]), a form of persuasion corresponding to his epistemological claims, which is necessary for the realization of his political program. *Psychagogia* aims at gaining access to the soul, and then ruling over it. Dialogue remains the means through which the philosopher communicates with interlocutors, but only in private—never in the public sphere. For only private dialogical rhetoric allows for the consideration of the soul in its particularity. Thus, *psychagogia* requires turning away from the public sphere. However, because the forms accessed through the soul are so thoroughly occluded by opinion, access to the soul requires that Plato begin by addressing opinion, undermining it, and finally transcending it. To achieve this goal, the Platonic method unfolds as an iterative process that begins by enticing the interlocutors with those opinions the *psychagogue* ultimately aims to refute. Socrates, for example, uses myth to win over Phaedrus, or city-building themes to win over Glaucon in *Republic* (including insincere praise of the founders in the aforementioned coaxing of his interlocutors), and proceeds to incrementally allow the interlocutor to discover for themselves the supposed fallacy of their own opinions. It is not by chance that the most famous instance of this involves founding a polity. The realm of the psychagogue is not the political foundation of a city, but rather its opposite, the foundation of a "city in *logos*." One can hardly think of a rhetorical mode more dissimilar to that of the orators and founders, and less conducive to politics of new foundations. Often, it is noted

[29]Plato, "Protagoras," in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson, trans. Karen Bell and Stanley Lombardo (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), 746–90; Plato, "Gorgias."

[30]Plato, "Phaedrus," 270a.

[31]Plato, "Gorgias," 515–7.

[32]Plato, "Phaedrus," 261a.

that Plato criticizes the use of rhetoric while simultaneously deploying rhetoric to persuade his readers. Plato's use of p*sychagogia* could be similarly construed as a redeployment of *action* by other means. However, that would be a mistake. In Plato's hands, constitutive rhetorical action is not criticized so much as it is replaced by its antinomy: stripped of its performativity, theatricality, and publicity. *Psychagogia* demarcates the realm of the philosopher, not the politician. Politics do follow, but they are the politics of repression and stasis. Plato's criticism of rhetorical action is perfunctory and crude, but the effective undermining of constitutive rhetorical action is all-encompassing and of immense historical consequence.

Aristotle's turn from Plato's philosophical abstraction to practice entails a guarded move back in the direction of the original understanding of *actio*, although with great apprehensiveness. Ultimately, this move was in the service of the cloistering of the concept within regular political situations. For this reason, we find in Aristotle the sharpest manifestation of the difficulty of theoretically wrangling the concept of *actio* as a political practice, instead of bluntly rejecting it. Rhetoric, for Aristotle, is an exceptional art, as it alone takes as its object other arts.[33] The role of the rhetor is to identify what is persuasive about a particular art and to present the proofs suitable for persuading their audience of the truth of the matter. The question of rhetoric, then, is a question of *pisteis*, or proofs. Aristotle delineates two general types of proofs: *atechnic*, those conditions that are outside the control of the rhetorician such as "witnesses, testimony from torture, contracts," and *entechnic*, to methods that can be prepared and controlled by the rhetorician.[34] The three *entechnic* proofs are the public perceptions of the speaker's character (*ethos*), the emotions of the listener or audience (*pathos*), and the persuasiveness of the argument itself (*logos*).[35] Successful rhetorical persuasion is contingent on the successful manipulation of these three factors in the service of proper syllogistic reasoning.

What of *actio* specifically? In book three of *On Rhetoric,* we find the first theoretical reflections on *actio* and its more recognizable connection to *pronuntiatio* and acting. In *On Rhetoric,* Aristotle has very little to say on these topics, and is indeed quite forthright about the undeveloped state of the theory of *actio*:

> The first thing to be examined was naturally that which came first by nature, the facts from which a speech has persuasive effect; second is how to compose this in language [*lexis*]; and third is something that

[33]Aristotle, *On Rhetoric*, 1355b.
[34]Aristotle, 1355b.
[35]Aristotle, 1356a-b.

> has the greatest force but has not yet been taken in hand, the matter of the delivery [*hypokrisis*]. Even in regard to tragedy and rhapsody, delivery was late in coming to be considered; for originally the poets themselves acted their tragedies. Clearly there is something like this in rhetoric, as in poetics.[36]

Aristotle ascribes the theoretical murkiness of the concept of rhetorical action to its relative newness as a theoretical concern. However, in retrospect, it seems more correct to say that he hit upon an essential perplexity inherent to the thing itself: the widely noted political power of rhetorical action ("something that has the greatest force") is a function of its capacity to overturn old orders and constitute new normative political horizons, while rhetorical theorization is circumscribed by constitutional backgrounds and functions under those normative constraints. Rhetorical action is not a practice or a speech that can be learned by rote. Rather, it is a practice that takes as its fodder unpredictable political events and fluid social contexts, and whose practitioners are always cast as particularly virtuous and eminent.

Perhaps for these reasons, Aristotle reverts to an essentially Platonic disposition by conflating his critique of rhetoric with his critique of democracy. While Aristotle is clear that *actio* is both undeveloped and under-theorized, he is nevertheless certain that it is the most debased form of rhetoric. Hence, although performers who are noted for their skill in the deployment of *actio* "are generally the ones who win poetic contests"—perhaps a reference to Themistocles—"just as actors are more important than poets now in the poetic contests, so it is in political contests because of the sad state of governments."[37] For this reason, rhetoricians are advised to study delivery "not because it is right but because it is necessary," since although the "facts themselves" are the foundation of successful rhetoric, "nevertheless, [delivery] has great power. . . . because of the corruption of the audience."[38]

Aristotle understood delivery as inseparable from acting in two senses. First, they both require a "natural talent," and are "not reducible to artistic rule." However, where delivery intersects with "how things are said [*lexis*]," it can be treated in a theoretical manner. Hence, for Aristotle, delivery as a technique is doubly debased, first insofar as it is contingent on natural talents, and second because it is always a public modality of persuasion. Where it is not natural and can be treated theoretically, it is necessarily debated. "Whenever delivery comes to be considered it will function in the same way as acting. . . . As a result,

[36]Aristotle, 1403b-4a.
[37]Aristotle, 1403b-4a.
[38]Aristotle, 1404a.

prizes go to those who are skilled at it, just as they do to orators on the basis of their delivery; for written speeches [when orally recited] have greater effect through expression [*lexis*] than through thought."[39] Aristotle immediately flags his inherent distrust of *actio*, noting that it was the rhetor Thrasymachus—who Plato's had described as asserting the "justice is the advantage of the stronger"[40]—who asserted the importance of emotional appeal through delivery. In this regard, delivery retains for Aristotle the unboundedness and potential power that was one of its defining features in the political variant of the rhetorical tradition, although it is recast as democratic, vulgar, and negative. Nevertheless, Aristotle does open what would become an enduring line of derogatory criticism of *actio* as an especially effeminate mode of rhetoric.[41]

In *Poetics*, Aristotle's critique of delivery is deeper still. In the discussion of tragedy, Aristotle extends his critique of delivery to poetry more generally. Aristotle defines tragedy as "an imitation of an action of serious stature and complete, having magnitude, in language made pleasing in distinct forms in its separate parts, imitating people acting and not using narration, accomplishing by means of pity and fear the cleansing of these states of feeling."[42] Tragedy is an imitation of an event. Story and character are that which is imitated, speech is a means of imitation, while thought, *opsis* (spectacle), and song-making are mimetic objects. Aristotle says that tragedy is an imitation of actions and life, happiness and wretchedness, but not of human beings. Therefore, actors should not mimic the person, but rather the moral actions—story and character—that convey the moral lessons of what constitutes the higher (or the good) and the lower (or the degraded): "So the actions performed and the story are the end of tragedy, and the end is the greatest of all things."[43]

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[39]Aristotle, 1404a.

[40]Plato, "Republic," 338c.

[41]Jodi Enders, "Delivering Delivery: Theatricality and the Emasculation of Eloquence," *Rhetorica: A Journal of the History of Rhetoric* 15, no. 3 (1997): 253–78. Enders concludes:

> Spanning hundreds of years of Western European thought, the theorists cited above [Enders addresses many of the theorists that I have addressed] share an aggressivity of response against one and the same phenomenon. There was something so powerful about the abstract theories and concrete practices of entities like 'femininity,' 'effeminacy,' and 'theater' that they all proved eminently capable of detracting from a male speaker's authority. (Enders, 273.)

[42]Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. Joe Sachs (Newburyport: Focus Publishing, 2006), 1449b25–9.

[43]Aristotle, 1450a23–5.

Tragedy "draws the soul" (Aristotle, like Plato, uses the term *psychagogia*, though in a broader sense) through "reversals and discoveries" that tell stories with an ethical principle, the transgression of which is recognized as being incongruent with one's own good. "The story, then," Aristotle writes, "is the source and is like the soul of the tragedy, and states of character rank second."[44] Inverting this analysis allows us to uncover Aristotle's critique of spectacle: "Spectacle, while it is able to draw the soul, is the component most foreign to the art and least inherent in poetry."[45] Aristotle's dilemma is that *actio* is manifestly powerful, irrespective of the story. Both in the affairs of the multitude, and within the realm of politics, "the art of making masks and set decorations has more control over bringing off the spectacle than does the art of the poets."[46] Here, Aristotle's preference for the rhetoric used in forensic rhetoric comes into conflict with the inescapable political fact of the power of constitutive rhetorical action. Having reluctantly assented to the vulgar power of tragedy and *actio*—while denying the actor any *philosophical* power in directing the audience towards truth—Aristotle finally turns to the tragedians themselves. Interestingly, he notes the peculiarity of the tragedians' skill. Unlike other rhetorical techniques, this skill is only found in a "naturally gifted person" or the "insane," the difference being that the poet is capable of conveying the passions, while the madman is merely bound by them.[47]

Another consequence is that the political aspects previously associated with rhetorical action (superlative eminence, rare, resistant to being captured theoretically) lose their naturalism and take on more mystical and mythical forms. One expression of this unclear idea in Aristotle—one that oscillates uncomfortably between the ancient tradition of the orator-founder and Aristotle's concern with theoretical compartmentalization—is found in Aristotle's curious discussion of the magnanimous man.

The magnanimous man is not usually discussed in terms of Aristotle's rhetorical considerations. But he should be. The discussions of magnanimity in *On Rhetoric* are limited, because Aristotle's concern is with the role of persuasion in constituted regimes, where the rhetoricians need to learn how to best navigate pre-given or constituted norms and institutions. Consequently, in *On Rhetoric* magnanimity is presented only as an other-regarding concern. In *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Politics*, however, a fully developed account of the persuasive power of magnanimity as enacted virtue is offered. In *Politics*, Aristotle takes

[44]Aristotle, 1450a35–9.
[45]Aristotle, 1450b16–9.
[46]Aristotle, 1450b17–20.
[47]Aristotle, 1455a35–6.

up the question of magnanimity in the midst of a discussion regarding the three correct constitutions. Aristotle observes a singular problem: "In the case of the best constitution" Aristotle writes, "there is a considerable problem, not about superiority in other goods, such as power or wealth or having many friends, but when there happens to be someone who is superior in virtue."[48] The issue is that there is a kind of virtue that supersedes all constituted norms, namely magnanimity. Aristotle speaks of "one person or more than one" who is/are "so outstanding by reason of his superior virtue that neither the virtue nor the political power of all the others is commensurable with his." Aristotle notes that "such men can no longer be regarded as part of the city-state"[49] and would "*reasonably be regarded as a god among human beings*."[50] Magnanimity, in short, naturally transcends political norms and has the natural power to constitute new political orders. It is an embodied constitutive rhetoric quite unlike deliberative, forensic, or epideictic modes. Hence, Aristotle writes that "people would not say that such a person should be expelled or banished, but neither would they say that they should rule over him." Therefore, "The remaining possibility—and it seems to be the natural one—is for everyone to obey such a person gladly, so that those like him will be permanent kings in their city-states."[51] Not a foundational moment or a re-foundation, not a city in *logos*, but something that begins to approximate myth (as will be seen, this is an important juncture in the history of *actio*, which Cicero will make much of). Aristotle's entire discussion of the character of the magnanimous man is one of public display and persuasive virtue. Despite that, the closest Aristotle gets to developing this idea is to note that the magnanimous man is typically calm, paced, and has a deep voice.[52] The similarities between the mode of action criticized by Aristotle in *Poetics* and the kind of politics valorized in *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Politics* are striking, as is the seeming avoidance on Aristotle's part to develop those similarities.

Commentators are often flustered by Aristotle's account of magnanimity, because it seems to be inconsistent with the rest of

[48]Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. C. D. C. Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1998), 1284b25–8.

[49]Aristotle, 1283b40–4a17.

[50]Aristotle, 1284a10 [emphasis added].

[51]Aristotle, 1284b25–34.

[52]Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1125a15–20. Jodi Enders notes that Aristotle's assault on theatrical action casts the actor as effeminate (see footnote 41, above). Aristotle's description of magnanimity could be seen as a step in the idealization of masculinity.

Aristotle's political philosophy. But they may have been misled by assuming that Aristotle had fully come to grips with the idea. If, instead, we read the discussion of magnanimity as an inflection point in the history of *actio*—one that disaggregates the idea into its various parts, clarifies the notion in some regards (by disaggregating the theatrical elements from the virtue ethics and by defining and describing each) and mystifies it in others (for example, by pushing the figure of the magnanimous man outside the realm of normal everyday politics while treating those politics as super human)—we can at least come to a better explanation as to why it is so fraught. Aristotle himself is struggling to explain a rhetorical-political phenomenon that functions primarily as a constituting phenomenon, inexplicable within the settled norms of a constituted regime. As a response to Plato, Aristotle may be seen to have allayed many of Plato's concerns by disaggregating constitutive rhetorical action into its various parts, construing them in seemingly antithetical ways, and ultimately treating them as entirely different topics. But as the proximity between his accounts of theatrical action and magnanimity seems to attest, he may not have been entirely successful. At the end of the day, the core problem remains unresolved: in practice, it is perhaps impossible to differentiate seeming magnanimity from practiced hypocrisy, which is almost exactly the problem that Plato set out to address.[53]

Nevertheless, in Aristotle's hands, *actio* retains a measure of its inexplicable socio-political power for new beginnings. But he has clearly embarked upon a path of de-mystification in some regards, and mystification in others. His systematic subordination of rhetoric to technical schematization results in a bifurcation of rhetoric into a vulgar variety attuned to mobs and moments of exceptional politics, and a rhetoric geared to normal politics. This, too, would prove to be an enduring discursive move.

Roman reconfigurations

Beginning from Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, but moving decisively beyond it, Cicero develops the textual-technical elements of rhetoric while expanding its scope to include figures and tropes. Cicero's emphasis is on the means and methods of evincing emotional response and

[53]I am grateful to the reviewers for their feedback on this section from which I borrowed the language of the "practiced hypocrite."

support, while simultaneously marking a continuation and acceleration of Aristotle's bifurcation of the concept into regular (proper) and irregular (vulgar) rhetoric. In *De Oratore*, Cicero formalizes five aspects of the rhetorical arts: *inventio*, *dispositio*, *elocutio*, *memoria*, and *actio*. In the first instance, *actio* is defined as the art of *pronuntiatio*—that is, as a technique for using the body to convey to an audience the appropriate emotion accompanying the argument. Extending Aristotle's claim that rhetoric is the mother of all arts, and taking heed of his discussion in the *Poetics*, Cicero asserts that *pronuntiatio* is the foremost of all the rhetorical techniques, insofar as its proficient use is a necessary condition for successful persuasion. All other rhetorical techniques, Cicero writes, "are but parts of a building as it were; the foundation is memory; that which gives it light is delivery."[54] Following his exposition of the other rhetorical techniques, Cicero writes in *De Oratore*: "the effect of all of these oratorical devices depends on how they are delivered."[55] Delivery "is the dominant factor in oratory; without delivery the best speaker cannot be of any account at all."[56]

The apparent reprieve of delivery is partly a function of the importance of the emotions for Cicero and, in turn, the unique capacity of delivery to connect directly with the emotions. The "vast and indeed incredible power" that Cicero ascribes to *actio*—demonstrated in its capacity to make "any impression on the unlearned crowd"—is derived from the theory that *actio* directly accesses core emotional truths "given by nature" and "rooted deep in the general sensibility, and nature has decreed that nobody shall be entirely devoid of these faculties."[57] However, this is not a question of ephemeral or superficial emotional responses. Rather, emotions reflect the natural force of the topic at hand. As well as being the most important and powerful of the rhetorical techniques, *actio* is the most plebeian. "All the factors of delivery" Cicero writes:

> contain a certain force bestowed by nature; which moreover is the reason why it is delivery that has most effect on the ignorant and the mob and lastly on barbarians; for words influence nobody but the person allied to the speaker by sharing the same language, and clever ideas frequently outfly the understanding of people who are not clever, whereas delivery, which gives the emotion of the same mind

[54]Marcus Tullius Cicero, *De Inventione, De Optimo Genere Oratorum, Topica*, ed. Jeffrey Henderson, trans. H. M. Hubbell, vol. II, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), De Optimo.2.

[55]Cicero, *De Oratore*, 1977, IV:3.56.

[56]Cicero, IV:3.56.

[57]Cicero, IV:3.50.

> expression, influence everybody, for the same emotions are felt by all people and they both recognize them in others and manifest them in themselves by the same marks.[58]

For Cicero, delivery in conjunction with style gives the orator direct access to the passions of the multitude. Delivery is unique in this regard, insofar as it is the only universally understood rhetorical technique.

Unlike Aristotle's criticism of *actio* in its theatrical mode, Cicero sees *actio* as revelatory, not deceptive or occluding. The purpose is not dissimulation or distraction, but simulation of the emotional weight of the topic at hand through the instantiation of those emotions. This explains why Cicero is so concerned with the resemblance between history and metaphorical ornamentation, and why proportionality and fit are crucial to the successful use of *actio*. Nature and truth are inherently better than their opposite; the role of the rhetor is to make this palpable and thereby actionable. Rhetorical extenuation or diminution must be calibrated with truth and effective communication. Quintilian would take up this same line of thought, as would Ben Jonson and others in the early modern period.

Cicero generally adheres to Plato's anti-theatricalism. This is most clear in his retention of the conceptual distinction between orators, and actors and sophists. The difference, to Cicero, is between emotional authenticity and inauthenticity, or between the natural and the phantasmal. However, unlike Plato and Aristotle, Cicero is primarily concerned not with the fact that the theatre privileges actors and feigned emotions instead of truth and character, but that the passions displayed in the theatre are themselves not true representations of the agent's emotions. Cicero's concern is that an overly enthusiastic purging of theatrical rhetoric from the orator's repertoire could impede the successful deployment of true emotional appeals in the service of the truth. Cicero therefore sets out to temper what he sees as the overextended anti-theatricalism of Plato and Aristotle: "My reason for dwelling on these points" Cicero writes, "is because the whole of this department has been abandoned by the orators, who are the players that act real life, and has been taken over by the actors, who only mimic reality."[59] And later, "because emotion, which mostly had to be displayed or else counterfeited by action, is often so confused as to be obscured and almost smothered out of sight, we have to dispel the things that obscure it and take up its prominent and

[58]Cicero, IV:3.59.
[59]Cicero, IV:3.57.

striking points."[60] It is exactly because emotions can be mimicked and reshaped through theatrics that rulers must deploy the rhetorical arts to foreground *true* emotions: "there can be no doubt that reality beats imitation in everything; and if reality unaided were sufficiently effective in presentation, we should have no need at all for art."[61]

All of this opens the discussion of simulation and dissimulation. For Cicero, the actor must necessarily dissimulate, because the actor neither knows his topic nor is truly invested in the consequences of its publicity. The orator, by contrast, is invested in bringing to light both the reason and the corresponding passions of his subject; the orator's primary concern is philosophical understanding. It is for this reason that Cicero writes that actors are not taken as seriously, or judged as harshly, as the orator.[62] Both are judged by the virtues of their respective endeavours in the first instance, and by the quality of their acting/*actio* in the second. However, unlike the orator, the actor has no stake in their endeavour.

Alongside Cicero's discussion of *actio* is a discussion of the orator-founder. Cicero's famous discussion of this figure is found in *De Inventione*. In an anthropological account of these figures, Cicero writes:

> If we wish to consider the origin of this thing we call eloquence—whether it be an art, a study, a skill, or a gift of nature—we shall find that it arose from most honourable causes and continued on its way from the best of reasons. . . . For there was a time when men wandered at large in the fields like animals and lived on wild fare; they did nothing by the guidance of reason, but relied chiefly on physical strength. . . . And so through their ignorance and error blind and unreasoning passion satisfied itself by misuse of bodily strength, which is a very dangerous servant. . . . At this juncture a man—great and wise I am sure—became aware of the power latent in man and the wide field offered by his mind for great achievements if one could develop this power and improve it by instruction. Men were scattered in the fields and hidden in sylvan retreats when he assembled and gathered them in accordance with a plan; he introduced them to every useful and honorouble occupation, though they cried out against it at first because of its novelty, and then when through reason and eloquence they had listened with greater attention, he transformed them from wild savages into a kind of gentle folk.[63]

[60]Cicero, IV:3.57.

[61]Cicero, IV:3.57.

[62]Marcus Tullius Cicero, *De Oratore, Books I & II*, ed. G. P. Goold, trans. E.W. Sutton and H. Rackham, vol. III, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: William Heinemann Ltd, 1979), 1.27.125.

[63]Cicero, *De Inventione, De Optimo Genere Oratorum, Topica*, II:1.1–2.

Just as the extraordinary politics of new foundations for the Greeks has transformed into a singular mythical act of foundation for the Romans, the idea of rhetorical action and new foundations has transformed from an elementally political and extraordinary form of rhetoric for the Greeks into a mythical, almost magical form of rhetoric for Cicero. The first polities, Cicero argues, were founded through great rhetorical feats creating a community of shared meaning bound by institutional forms. Cicero's orator-founder is an outstanding figure in the history of the rhetorical arts, and early modern rhetoricians picked up this passage with great enthusiasm.[64] This orator-founder is characterized as acting through oratorical persuasion alone, without resorting to violence, spectacle, power, charisma, or pre-established authority. Indeed, Cicero's orator-founder achieves this extraordinary feat in exclusion from politics and violence. "Certainly," Cicero writes, "only a speech at the same time powerful and entrancing could have induced one who had great physical strength to submit to justice without violence, so that he suffered himself to be put on a par with those among whom he could excel, and abandoned voluntarily a most agreeable custom."[65] As noted, in its political mode, it is this account of rhetorical action that resonates throughout the tradition from this point on. However, it is crucial to register how radical a reconfiguration of the politics involved is at hand. The ancient orator-founders had the guide of historical experience to anchor their understanding of *actio*, and Aristotle—surely stepping in the direction of mystification in his account—still had a clear vision of the politics at hand (however much he struggled to wrangle them theoretically). Contrastingly in Cicero, the rhetorical action that constituted the new polity had, like Roman foundations themselves, been relegated to the realm of myth.[66] The mythologization of *actio* in Cicero's writings is exemplified negatively by the limited scrutiny it actually receives. Cicero may praise *actio*, but he affords only a few pages to the explication of the technique, paying much more attention to *inventio*, *dispositio*, and *elocutio*.

From Cicero onwards, we find the fortification of the split in the history of the concept of *actio*, which will develop into two apparently irreconcilable traditions. The first conceives of *actio* as mere pronunciation and then hand gestures, which, as a result, is necessarily

[64]Skinner, *Reason and Rhetoric*, 93.
[65]Cicero, *De Inventione, De Optimo Genere Oratorum, Topica*, II:1.2.
[66]Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (London: Penguin Books, 1990), 207–11.

abstracted from actual political disputation. The second focuses on the orator-founder, whose practice becomes essentially mythical and, in some instances, magical.[67] Both pull away from constitutive rhetorical action in the ancient sense, yet both are persistently discomforted by the potential of those politics.

In Quintilian, *actio* remains formally an important part of the rhetorician's arsenal, and the bifurcated and somewhat paradoxical characterization of the concept is retained. The emphasis shifts decisively away from the orator-founder figure towards an increasingly technical analysis of the concept itself. Quintilian begins, much in line with Cicero, in Book XI of *Institutio Oratoria*, writing that *actio*

> has an extraordinarily powerful effect in oratory. For the nature of the speech that we have composed within our minds is not so important as the manner in which we produce it, since the emotion of each member of our audience will depend on the impression made upon his hearing. Consequently, no proof, at least if it be one devised by the orator himself, will ever be so secure as not to lose its force if the speaker fails to produce it in tones that drive it home. All emotional appeals will inevitably fall flat, unless they are given the fire that voice, look, and the whole carriage of the body can give.[68]

For Quintilian, the power of *actio* is a function of the relationship between gestures and the voice, and sight and hearing, respectively, which are the two senses most strongly linked to the passions.[69] Yet, Quintilian says almost nothing more about *actio* except in the form of gestures. One is left with the impression that Quintilian understands *actio* as a capstone to a rhetorical performance, as opposed to the keystone it was for Cicero.

Quintilian also loosens Cicero's link between philosophy and rhetoric, affording a higher standing to acting, and praising the power of actors to supply substantial emotive force to arguments they may not understand or believe. Actors, Quintilian notes, "add so much to the charm even of the greatest powers, that the verse moves us far more when heard than when read, while they succeed in securing a hearing even for the most worthless authors." Quintilian cites Demosthenes's famous praise of *actio* and the value Demosthenes

[67]There may be a Platonic precursor here as well. In the *Euthydemus* Plato describes some public rhetors in ways that characterize the rhetor as an "enchanter" and the people as exceptional vulgar and eager to be enchanted. See, Vickers, *In Defence of Rhetoric*, 137–38.

[68]Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*, trans. H. E. Butler, vol. IV (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1922), 9.3.1–2.

[69]Quintilian, IV:9.3.14.

gained "under the instructions of the actor Andronicus,"[70] notably saying nothing of Demosthenes's political deeds. Having also abandoned Plato's strict distinction between knowledge and opinion, Quintilian advances his own distinction between "true emotion" and "false or fictitious emotion." "The former," Quintilian writes, "breaks out naturally, as in the case of grief, anger, or indignation, but lacks art, and therefore requires to be formed by methodical training." "The latter," he continues, "does imply art, but lacks the sincerity of nature."[71] Quintilian therefore breaks from the anti-theatricalism introduced by Plato.[72] Nevertheless, Quintilian's concern is fleeting, speaking not to its continued importance but rather to its successful subordination to the *vita contemplativa*.

Reformation and Renaissance rhetoric

As the historical practice of new foundations and constitutive rhetoric receded ever further into historical memory, the idea of rhetorical action became both more mundane and more fantastically mythological (if not magical). Indeed, the mythological elements slowly came to be dissociated with rhetoric, while those few aspects that were amenable to codification and instruction came to be considered representative of the technic. Early modern rhetorical theory marks the apex of this long historical trend.

Scholars of seventeenth century rhetoric tend not to concern themselves with the idea of rhetorical action.[73] Instead, their focus is on the three classical rhetorical techniques: *inventio* ("the devising of matter, true or plausible, that would make the case convincing"[74]); *disposition*, or "arrangement" ("the ordering and distribution of the matter, making clear the place to which each thing is to be assigned"[75]); and *elocution*, or "style," ("the adaptation of suitable words and sentences to the matter devised"[76]). But these are

[70]Quintilian, IV:11.3.2–7.

[71]Quintilian, IV:11.3.61–3.

[72]Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*, trans. H. E. Butler, vol. II (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1921), 6.1.26–7.

[73]To give just one example, in Quentin Skinner's study of rhetoric in Hobbes he treats *pronunciation* only fleetingly where it is understood only in terms of gestures and enunciation. See, Skinner, *Reason and Rhetoric*, 278, but see also 87–90.

[74]Marcus Tullius [Cicero], *Rhetorica Ad Herennium*, trans. Harry Caplan, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964), 1.2.

[75][Cicero], 1.2.

[76][Cicero], 1.2.

only three of the five major rhetorical techniques. The other two are *memoria* ("the firm retention in the mind of the matter, words, and arrangement"[77]) and *pronuntiatio,* or "delivery" or "*actio*," ("the graceful regulation of voice, countenance, and gesture"[78]). There are many good reasons why scholars would focus on *inventio*, *dispositio*, and *elocutio*. A brief survey of seventeenth century classical rhetorical theory quickly reveals that it pays scant attention to *pronuntiatio*—due in large measure to that era's focus on pedagogy, philosophy, and theology (where the author is the rhetor and the reader the audience)—wherein *pronuntiatio* serves a limited function. Those rhetoricians of the early-modern period who do address *pronuntiatio* tend to isolate very specific elements that can be drawn and schematized—for example hand gestures, facial expressions, or posture. The shining Renaissance example of this is John Bulwer's *Chirologia*.[79]

With few exceptions, studies of the rhetorical arts in this period concern the private teaching of moral philosophy or formal courtroom disputation. Thomas Wilson's *The Art of Rhetoric* (1560), the first Ciceronian work of rhetoric printed in English, is exemplary in this regard. Wilson limits his explication of *actio* to pronunciation and gestures and to a total of four paragraphs in the conclusion to the third book of his lengthy study.[80] More often, *actio* is absent, as in Henry Peacham's *The Garden of Eloquence* (1577). Alternatively, *actio* is treated in a stylized accounting of gestures, as in John Bulwer's *Chirologia: Or the Natural Language of the Hand* (1644).

Surprisingly, this is true as well for the Ramist rhetorical tradition. *Actio* sees something of revival in the hands of Pierre de la Ramée (Petrus Ramus) and Omer Talon, who reassert the Roman understanding of *actio* as hand gestures forming an integral element of *elocution* (or "striking expression"), therein subdivided into voice and gesture.[81] For Ramus and Talon, *actio* was intended to constitute one of the two major parts of rhetoric. However, the diagrammatic promise was belied—as it was in a similar way with Cicero and Quintilian—by a lack of meaningful consideration. The Ramist rhetorician Dudley Fenner would—first anonymously in 1584, then under his own name

[77][Cicero], 1.2.

[78][Cicero], 1.2.

[79]John Bulwer, *Chirologia: Or, The Natural Language of the Hand and Chironomia: Or, The Art of Manual Rhetoric*, ed. James W. Cleary (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1974).

[80]Thomas Wilson, *The Art of Rhetoric*, ed. Peter E. Medine (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), 218–21.

[81]Walter J. Ong, *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue: From the Art of Discourse to the Art of Reason* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 273.

in 1588—attempt to address this lacuna in his *The Artes of Logike and Rhetorike* (the first work of Ramist rhetoric published in English[82]). However, Fenner's influence was limited to the church and the pulpit. Far more influential were the original works of Ramus and Talon, who afforded the majority of their attention to textual rhetorical practices. For this reason, Ong writes that "the irreducibly vocal and auditory phenomena of actual spoken delivery, which the second part of rhetoric purportedly taught, escape the diagrammatic apparatus somehow intrusive in all explanatory approaches to communication."[83] The result is that "the Ramist 'plain style' is a manner of composition, not of voice and gesture."[84] *Actio* continued to resist the philosophers' grasp, two millennia after Aristotle remarked that it was likely due to the novelty of the technique that *actio* had not been properly considered.

By the mid seventeenth century, the concept of *actio* in its *political* sense as understood by the ancients had been all but lost. In its place were two highly stylized version of *actio,* both stemming from Cicero. The first was that of *pronuntiatio*. The second, derivative of Cicero's ideal orator whose powers are understood as near magical.[85] The ancient conception of rhetoric as constitutive politics—expressed as great political actions—is effectively gone or perfectly mystified. Consequently, studies of *inventio, dispositio,* and *elocutio* dominate the age. Certainly, one must flag the expansion of the scope of *elocutio* in the era to include in *elocutio* imitations of what was once *actio*. As Vicker's notes, "All the power and skill of the ancient orators was claimed by Renaissance writers, so that the ability to move the affections through language—now written—became a fundamental property of literature."[86] *Oratio* had become part of the literary genre "intended for the reader, not for a live audience."[87] Of course, the shift to the written word is paramount in understanding why *actio*—and the political phenomenology previously associated with it—took the form that it did. Hence, it is widely, if tacitly, agreed that by the 17th century, *actio* had reached its nadir. Or, put another way, it was described in similar terms, but had transformed into a rather different thing altogether: a petrified and ossified version of its original.

[82]Emma Annette Wilson, "Fenner, Dudley," in *The Encyclopedia of English Renaissance Literature*, ed. Garrett A. Sullivan and Alan Stewart (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2012).

[83]Ong, *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue*, 273.

[84]Ong, 273.

[85]Skinner, *Reason and Rhetoric*, 87–93.

[86]Vickers, *In Defence of Rhetoric*, 286.

[87]Vickers, 287.

However, as I hope to show in the next section—and as I hope the previous explication of the relationship between the phenomenology of the *vita activa* and *actio* help make clear—there is one place where, against the classical and Renaissance rhetoricians' effective displacement of politics and *actio,* we find a renaissance of *actio*: the theatre. Indeed, and in sharp contrast to the tacit agreement, it stands to reason that it was in fact the rhetoricians' accounting of *actio* that had reached its nadir. *Actio* itself was experiencing its own renaissance.

Theatrum rhetoricum

The story that needs to be told is that of the poets and, more importantly, the dramatists. From their perspective, the picture looks quite different. Heinrich Plett writes that "Rhetorical dissembling manifests itself in words and actions, that is, in the media of *elocutio* and *actio*. In the first case there is a staging of language, in the second a staging of the body. The rhetorical illusion of the play of the body falls under the competence of the orator as an actor (and vice versa), that of the play of language under his competence as a poet (and vice versa)." He concludes that "here the *theatrum rhetoricum* becomes the arena of social and political action."[88] Plett was speaking to the remarkable explosion in interest in rhetorical action in the early modern period, rising from underneath—and against—two millennia of philosophical and theological restraints. In stark contrast to the emaciated theory of *actio* found in the early modern rhetoricians, early modern dramatists took up *actio* with partisan verve against staunch puritan opposition. Part of this has to do with the specific spatial politics of the theatre. Their enthusiastic adoption of *actio*—and the reconsideration of its place and potential—can be accounted for by the categorical differences between the place of the schoolroom or the church and the stage. Dramatists are inherently interested in what Aristotle found so debased about *actio*, namely its emotional and populist power, and radical capacity for moral reconstruction against established norms. In the history of *actio*, this period marks a decisive point of contestation.

From the mid–sixteenth to the mid–seventeenth century, the theatre went through multiple phases of expression and repression.[89]

[88]Heinrich F. Plett, *Rhetoric and Renaissance Culture* (Walter de Gruyter, 2004), 252.

[89]The classic work on this is Jonas Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

Throughout this period, numerous tracts were published both in support of and in opposition to acting and the theatre. In this respect, the seventeenth century theatrical debate is something of a re-enactment of the ancient contest between Plato and the founders and politicians. The seventeenth century version of this battle was carried out between puritan anti-theatricalism—bolstered by royal censure—and the early modern dramatists. The puritans took up the Platonic critique with fanatic enthusiasm. For example, in *A Treatise Against Dicing, Dancing, Plays, and Interludes, with Other Idle Pastimes* (1577), John Northbrooke had "Age" tell "Youth":

> I am persuaded that Satan has not a more speedy way and fitter school to work and teach his desire, to bring men and women into his snare of concupiscence and filthy lusts of wicked whoredom, than those places, and plays, and theaters are: and therefore it is necessary that those places and players should be forbidden and dissolved and put down by authority, as the brothel houses and stews are.[90]

Likewise, in *School of Abuse* (1579), Stephen Gosson makes no less colourful an attack:

> Let us but shut up our ears to poets, pipers, and players; pull our feet back from resort to theaters, and turn away our eyes from beholding of vanity; the greatest storm of abuse will be overblown, and a fair path trodden to amendment of life. Were not we so foolish to taste every drug, and buy every trifle, players would shut in their shops, and carry their trash to some other country.[91]

Similar condemnations are repeated throughout subsequent decades, taking a most vitriolic form in William Prynne's *Histriomastix: The Player's Scourge* (1633).[92]

What is striking about these attacks is that the highly technical understanding of *actio* is of marginal concern. Instead, what one finds is a concern with theatre as real political power, one that has a wide audience, and can undermine established political institutions through mere rhetorical persuasion. It is indicative of the perception that theatrical rhetoric had a role in upending and supplanting moral, social, and political norms. In seventeenth century England, the theatre was

[90]John Northbrooke, "A Treatise Against Dicing, Dancing, Plays, and Interludes, with Other Idle Pastimes [1577]," in *Shakespeare's Theater: A Sourcebook*, ed. Tanya Pollard (Maiden: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 2–3.

[91]Stephen Gosson, "School of Abuse [1579]," in *Shakespeare's Theater: A Sourcebook*, ed. Tanya Pollard (Maiden: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 28.

[92]William Prynne, "Histriomastix: The Player's Scourge [1633]," in *Shakespeare's Theater: A Sourcebook*, ed. Tanya Pollard (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 279–286.

viewed as destructive of the moral and political order. Critics of the theatre perceived identities as being peddled like "drugs," a critique stoked by the increasing powerlessness of the pulpit in shaping public opinion.[93] The exception to this rule was, of course, dramatists and poets themselves. Against the state- and church-supported attacks levelled against them, the dramatists defended their art. At the core of that defense was a defense of *actio*.

One of the earliest defenses of the theatre is found in George Puttenham's *The Art of English Poesie*, published in 1589, but likely written in the 1560s. Puttenham was no radical, but against the staunchest anti-theatrical criticisms, he redeploys Aristotle's guarded defense in *Poetics* of poetry's socially constructive potential in the political and moral affairs of the regime. In 1595, Philip Sydney published *An Apology for Poetry*, written in response to Gosson's earlier attack. Following Puttenham, Sydney emphasizes the potential of theatrical mimesis as a tool for disciplinary moral pedagogy through the spectacular re-enactment of the true and the good. Sydney goes further than Puttenham or Aristotle in extending his defense of poetry to the techniques of invention and ornamentation, with an emphasis on metaphors and analogies, to bring out poetry's moral and aesthetic potential. Echoing Cicero, Sydney writes that "Nature never set forth the earth in so rich tapestry as diverse poets have done," continuing that, "neither with pleasant rivers, fruitful trees, sweet smelling flowers, nor whatsoever else may make the too much loved earth more lovely. Her world is brazen, the poets only deliver a golden." And later: "Now therein of all sciences . . . is our poet the monarch. For he doth not only show the way, but giveth so sweet a prospect into the way as will entice any man to enter into it."[94] But unlike Cicero, Sydney argues that the power of poetry and the poet is to make the truth of nature more evident than it appears. Sydney is exemplary of early modern dramatists not only in mimicking the ancients, but also in actively contributing to rhetorical theory.

The dramatists understood tragedy as especially well attuned to the danger of tyranny because, through *actio*, the poet "openeth the greatest wounds and showeth forth the ulcers that are covered with tissue, that maketh kings fear to be tyrants, and tyrants manifest their tyrannical humors." Sydney gives the example of "how much it can move" by recalling Plutarch's story of the "abominable tyrant Alexander Pheraeus, from whose eyes a tragedy well made and represented drew abundance of tears, who without all pity

[93]Gosson, "School of Abuse [1579]," 28.

[94]Philip Sidney, "An Apology for Poetry [1595]," in *Shakespeare's Theater: A Sourcebook*, ed. Tanya Pollard (Maiden: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 149.

had murdered infinite numbers, and some of his own blood: so as he that was not ashamed to make matters for tragedies, yet could not resist the sweet violence of a tragedy."[95] Theatrical mimesis—including the use of rhetorical ornamentation and amplification, but actualized in *actio*—was, for Sidney, a great tactical advantage conferred only on the theatre, since it allowed for a depiction of nature at once clearer and more assertive than nature itself.[96] All of the above is set out in clear light of the popularity of Plato's critique of poetry, which was then being brandished against the poets.[97]

In *An Apology for Actors* (1612), Thomas Heywood took up a similar defense, while focusing on the mimetic potential of theatre. Heywood's foremost contention is that the theatre could augment regal power, instead of undermining it. Heywood is also notable for his embrace of the theatrical set as the medium of symbolic representation. To this end, Heywood notes, dramatists should not adopt the minimalist *mise en scène* that the Greeks practiced and Aristotle advocated, instead adopting elaborate set designs as integral to the mimetic experience. He argues that the court could be legitimated through the spectacle of great acts of regal glories, and that *actio*—in conjunction with elaborate staging—was the most effective rhetorical mode for representing the court's grandeur. Theatrical representation of the ancient "worthies" was to be deployed to "effect the like wonders in the princes of our times," which, Heywood continues, "can no way be so exquisitely demonstrated, nor so lively portrayed, as by action."[98] *Actio* is required because

> a description is only a shadow received by the ear, but not perceived by the eye; so, lively portraiture is merely a form seen by the eye, but can

[95]Sidney, 151.

[96]Although there is some continuity between Sydney's praise of poetics and the theatre, we should be careful not to project this praise of the stage too far. As Barish notes, Sydney was as often dismissive of the "naughtie Play-makers and Stage-keepers." Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice*, 117. Concerning this same episode, Plett writes,

> The perfected art of acting, which manifests itself in the *movere* of the spectator, depends on a realistic *imitatio vitae* . . . 'Realistic' in this context means 'energetic,' a rhetorical term to which English dramas of the Renaissance often appeal with such phrases as 'acted to life' or 'lively action.' An energetic performance is characterized by a mimesis that is not only true to reality but above all effective. This is the essence of rhetorical realism. (Plett, *Rhetoric and Renaissance Culture*, 266.)

[97]Sidney, "An Apology for Poetry [1595]," 152–59.

[98]Thomas Heywood, "An Apology for Actors [1612]," in *Shakespeare's Theater: A Sourcebook*, ed. Tanya Pollard (Maiden: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 220 [this quotation was originally styled as a rhetorical question. I have adjusted the punctuation].

> neither show action, passion, motion, or any other gesture, to move the spirits of the beholder to admiration. But to see a soldier shaped like a soldier, walk, speak, act like a soldier; to see a Hector all besmeared in blood, trampling upon the bulks of kings . . . Oh, these were sights to make an Alexander.[99]

For Heywood, the theatre is a place of productive mimetic description and re-description, where identities can be constituted and stabilized. "So bewitching a thing is lively and well spirited action," Heywood writes, "that it hath power to new mold the hearts of the spectators and fashion them to the shape of any noble and notable attempt."[100] The question for Heywood is not one of authentic versus inauthentic identities—to Heywood, identities are always enacted—but rather one of power and politics, and of controlling the means through which identities are enacted, adjudicated, and reified.

Heywood collapses Cicero's distinction between the actor and the orator, and he does so against the humanist rhetoricians' downplaying of *actio* as mere pronunciation.[101] Thus, he writes:

> These wise men of Greece (so called by the oracle) could, by their industry, find out no nearer or directer course to plant humanity and manners in the hearts of the multitude than to instruct them by moralized mysteries what vices to avoid; what virtues to embrace; what enormities to abandon; what ordinances to observe; whose lives (being for some special endowments in former times honored) they should admire and follow; whose vicious actions (personated in some licentious liver) they should despise and shun: which, borne out as well by the wisdom of the poet as supported by the worth of the actors, wrought such impression in the hearts of the plebe that in short space they excelled in civility and government, insomuch that from them all the neighbor nations

[99]Heywood, 220.

[100]Heywood, 227.

[101]Interestingly, Heywood considers *actio* as sixth form of rhetoric, presumably because of the sharp discrepancy between what *actio* did mean for the ancients and what it came to mean in Heywoods time. He writes:

> Tully, in his book *Ad Caium Herennium,* requires five things in an orator: invention, disposition, elocution, memory, and pronunciation, yet all are imperfect without the sixth, which is action. For be his invention never so fluent and exquisite, his disposition and order never so composed and formal, his eloquence, and elaborate phrases never so material and pithy, his memory never so firm and retentive, his pronunciation never so musical and plausive; yet without a comely and elegant gesture, a gracious and a bewitching kind of action, a natural and a familiar motion of the head, the hand, the body; and a moderate and fit countenance suitable to all the rest, I hold all the rest as nothing. (Heywood, 227.)

> drew their patterns of humanity, as well in the establishing of their laws as the reformation of their manners.[102]

Heywood's focus was not only on the orator-founders and poets, but more broadly the great virtuous acts found in the annals of antiquity. The stage enabled the power of spectacle (*opsis*) in the moulding of identity and in the undertaking of great political acts. As with the representatives of the political variant of *actio*, virtue and awe are conjoined with rhetoric in a sovereign-conducted, power-augmenting spectacle. "If we present a tragedy," Heywood writes, "we include the fatal and abortive ends of such as commit notorious murders, which is aggravated and acted with all the art that may be, to terrify men from the like abhorred practices." And later, "if a moral, it is to persuade men to humanity and good life, to instruct them in civility and good manners, showing them the fruits of honesty, and the end of villainy."[103]

Another playwright who attempted to calibrate humanism with theatrical rhetoric was Ben Jonson. But unlike many of his theatrical contemporaries, Jonson was distrustful of the theatre as a philosophical and pedagogical medium.[104] Like Aristotle, Jonson was concerned that irrespective of the depth of his philosophical understanding of the topic at hand, the success of the play was ultimately contingent on the playgoers, over whom Jonson had little control. Due to the fickle power of the playwright over the audience, Jonson held ample suspicion of the theatre as a medium to communicate the basic moral truths of nature. Nevertheless, Jonson joins Heywood in acknowledging the significant normative potential of the theatre in its public capacity in the regulation and fortification of agency and political life. Hence, Jonson did not dismiss or resist spectacle, and rhetorical *actio* as Aristotle counselled. Jonson, instead, set to put it under his control.[105]

For this reason, Jonson rejected Aristotle's appeal to minimalist *mise en scène*. Rather than setting his plays in Rome or Athens, Jonson's great innovation was to use London as their backdrop, which allowed the setting to become an essential element of the play.[106] For example, in *Bartholomew Fair*, Jonson complicates the *polloi/aristoi* distinction to show the essential debasement that marks the equality of men, while the "Paul's Walk" scene of *Every Man out of*

[102]Heywood, 225–6.
[103]Heywood, 241.
[104]Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice*, 135.
[105]Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1450b.
[106]Ben Jonson, *Every Man Out of His Humour*, ed. Helen Ostovich (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), 41–2 [editor's introduction].

His Humour, Helen Ostovich notes, "demonstrates that the hungry predators and parasites lurk in all classes and occupations." These social and moral criticisms are not of another society; they take place within the *mikrokosmos* of St. Paul's cathedral. There, the characters interact and negotiate their relative socio-political lives "as an obsessively competitive dance."[107] St. Paul's stands "as a rhetorical *locus communis*," a site where meaning is contended, asserted, reified, and displaced.[108] Had Jonson set these plays in Athens or Rome, the critique would be projected onto an alien community. In using London, Jonson turns the critical moral reflections back on the audience. Jonson was trying to address the *atechnic* elements of the theatrical experience—for Jonson, the morally, politically, philosophically, and aesthetically depraved multitude—into the play itself. Thereby, the representation of the polity is made an *entechnic* aspect of theatrical rhetoric, and the multitude—at least the immanent representation of the multitude—could be partially placed under the control of the playwright. The theatre house opened up a space for political and moral perspectivism, and thereby political and moral judgment. The play-within-a-play technique and the power of rhetorical mimesis provided Jonson with a powerful venue to stake his humanist claims.

Jonson thought that dramatists should not deploy simulation and dissimulation in the service of deception. Rather, Jonson presupposes a basic morality that will be evident to the audience throughout. His works are not philosophical exegeses on the good and the true; they are spectacles of that which is obviously virtuous, and that which is obviously debased. Jonson assumes the task of the educator, of guiding his audience to that which they know already. As one commentator noted, for Jonson the "poet's task is to strengthen that intuition by leading it from such simple evaluations to far more complex moral judgments; and that the aesthetic recognition to which poetic logic appeals is also present in every man, because it is the twin of that moral recognition the poet activates, both born of the impulse toward the Good which makes man human."[109] Jonson's goal was moral pedagogy, and the intention was to enable a mimetic play wherein the multitude could be coaxed towards a sort of proxy humanism. This was, for Jonson, the special burden of the poet.

[107]Jonson, 59 [editor's introduction].

[108]Jonson, 60 [editor's introduction].

[109]Gabriele Bernhard Jackson, *Vision and Judgment in Ben Jonson's Drama* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), 161.

Conclusion

Rhetorical action, in its highest form, amounts to a capacity to deconstruct and reconstruct the normative order of a regime by transforming the underlying political identity of its people. Its medium is human plurality and the public spheres that emerge where people congregate. At its core, this is a question of parameters. Rhetorical *actio* is a parameter-setting mode of rhetoric. Rhetorical theory, by contrast, has unfolded, functioning within those parameters. It is for that reason that *actio* has often been seen as being the singular mode of rhetoric, but yet has avoided theoretical subordination and technical refinement.

Greek political philosophy was inaugurated as an assault upon those constitutive politics, and a world of mystification, degradation, and abuse has followed. And yet, as quickly as Plato went to war against the idea, it was also of enduringly compelling interest. Plato concedes as much by appropriating the city-building metaphor in the service of philosophy. But the original assault was of enduring significance, and the historical shift away from politics and toward textual modes of persuasion conspired to sunder the formal accounting of *actio* into mythical, magical, vulgar, mundane and technical concerns. We see this struggle in Aristotle, who signaled the importance of rhetorical action but, quite uncharacteristically, conceded that it remains an essentially untheorized and only partially understood form of persuasion. Many others—from Cicero onwards—have proclaimed the importance of rhetorical action, but most have failed to develop it. We see this negatively in the renaissance accounts of rhetoric as either magical or as mundane hand gestures. It was only at that period that Bulwer's *Chirologia* could finally give a thoroughgoing technical account of *actio* only to reveal that its technical nature had little to do with its promised power. If the early modern rhetoricians finally overcame the paradox of the persistent resistance of *actio* to theoretical subordination, they did so only because the idea had become petrified, and they had to start anew. Consequently, rhetoricians (and pedagogues and theologians) of the early modern period adhered to an emaciated theory of rhetorical action. Indeed, they were likely flummoxed by the ancients' persistent warnings regarding the immense power of *actio* to found cities and persuade the vulgar masses. That account makes up the lion's share of historical reflections on early modern accounts of rhetorical action.

It was only once the political space of the theater was opened anew that the constitutive function of rhetorical action was revived. This is not by chance, I believe. The theatre is not only a public place,

it is a microcosm for constituting new political spaces allowing for experimentation in parameter creation and the world of politics that follows. When the dramatists looked for precursors, they would have certainly paid attention to the technical discussions of gesticulation in the early modern period. But when they followed those ideas back to their source, they found a groundswell of far more vibrant theories and practices. Indeed, the dramatists and poets not only revived the ancient notion, but updated it and pushed it into new directions. As both the dramatists and poets—and their legion of adversaries—agreed, the emergence of the theatre as a social and public space stripped the tradition of its mystifications, by revealing that *actio* in public could command significant ethical, social, and political power. It could constitute new political identities. If the standing theories of *actio* evoked fantastic notions of great rhetorical power—but presented mundane accounts of hand gestures—theatrical practices afforded *actio* new and concrete meaning, and very quickly its constitutive potential as an elemental political power was rediscovered.